

Breaking the Silence: An Examination of the Single Mother's Voice in an HIV Environment – Tendayi Westerhof's *Unlucky in Love*

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Summary

Trends have shown that writing is a male domain, and the act of writing alone is a positive development on the part of the woman. The writing of an autobiography by Tendayi Westerhof opens a new avenue on contemporary women's issues. The narrative tackles the challenges of single motherhood, career/celebrity experiences of a woman as well as HIV. Westerhof also goes a yard further by harnessing activism to her work. Not only does she offer a personal testimony, but she also takes the initiative to spread awareness regarding the pandemic and the vulnerability of women. Being HIV positive, Westerhof lends a voice to the voiceless women by exploring their experiences in a number of ways; through the conventional, ordinary woman/growing girl, the woman as a single mother, the woman and HIV, the woman in a mixed marriage and the woman as a survivor. Hers is a complex narrative which offers insights into the challenges that contemporary women face. She brings to the fore the stigma that is often associated with HIV, a feat which must have taken a lot of courage and willpower. This paper interrogates the extent to which the narrator is successful in recounting her story.

Opsomming

Tendense het getoon dat skryf die domein van die man is, en dat die blote handeling van skryf 'n positiewe ontwikkeling aan die kant van die vrou is. Die skryf van 'n outobiografie deur Tendayi Westerhof bied 'n nuwe perspektief op kontemporêre vrouekwessies. Die narratief pak die uitdagings van enkelmoederskap, loopbaan-/selebriteit-ervarings van 'n vrou asook MIV. Westerhof gaan verder deur aktivisme by haar werk in te span. Nie net gee sy 'n persoonlike getuigenis nie, maar sy neem ook die inisiatief om bewustheid van die pandemie en die kwesbaarheid van vroue te versprei. Westerhof, wat MIV-positief is, gee 'n stem aan die stemlose vroue deur hulle ondervindings op 'n aantal maniere te verken; deur die konvensionele, gewone vrou/groeiende meisie, die vrou as 'n enkelmoeder, die vrou en MIV, die vrou in 'n gemengde huwelik en die vrou as 'n oorlewende. Haar narratief is kompleks en gee insig in die uitdagings waarvoor vroue vandag te staan kom. Sy bring die stigma na vore wat dikwels met MIV gepaardgaan, wat baie moed en wilskrag moes geveer.

het. Hierdie referaat ondersoek die mate waarin die verteller geslaag het met die vertel van haar verhaal.

Introduction

Most African autobiographies are recollections of prominent people or equally significant events and are largely political or historical. Southern African autobiographies of this nature such as Fay Chung's recent *Re-living the Second Chimurenga* (2006), and Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995) recount the stories of political figures in their struggles for independence from colonialism. Some local autobiographies have moved away from this trend and have attempted to chronicle events of ordinary and the not so prominent individuals' lives. Many of these have come in fictional form thus leading to the emergence of a new genre of fictional autobiography or semi-autobiography as some scholars would put it. This presents us with a problem as to how to distinguish fiction from fact for, as Dennet (1992: 96) has pointed out, there is a degree of autobiography in every work of fiction and "it takes a real self to create a fictional self". Fictional autobiographies are a common phenomenon and many writers have written using this genre, including Ezekiel Mphahlele (*Down Second Avenue* (1959)) and Dumbudzo Marechera (*House of Hunger* (1978)), and male writers have mainly dominated the genre. Tendayi Westerhof thus joins the rather short but growing list of Zimbabwean women who use this genre as a way of expressing their innermost worries, fears, anxieties as well as hopes. These include Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), more recently Lutanga Shaba's *The Secrets of a Woman's Soul* (2005) and Dangarembga's sequel to *Nervous Conditions*, *The Book of Not* (2006). *Unlucky in Love* also comes at a time when the Zimbabwean society is grappling with the effects of the pandemic AIDS, and takes its place amongst the flourishing genre of AIDS narratives. Its uniqueness lies in the readiness of the protagonist Rumbidzai (Rumbi for short) to disclose her HIV status and to reveal how she may have contracted the virus; subjects deemed taboo by many Zimbabweans. This paper thus interrogates the extent to which Westerhof deals with a subverted identity within the context of HIV and AIDS, particularly her status of being a single mother.

It is of importance to distinguish between the single mother and the unmarried mother. The former concept does not rightly capture the diverse circumstances around this condition of motherhood. It could include women who have lost their husbands through death or through divorce or are single by choice. In this paper, the terms are used interchangeably mainly because Westerhof has experienced both worlds of being both an unmarried woman when she has children out of wedlock and as a single mother when she divorces. While the term single parent may seem preferable to some, this appears to indicate the state of having been married once and having shared

the duties of parenthood with a partner, before break-up either by divorce or death. In Westerhof's case, however, this has not been the state of affairs, as all her children were born outside marriage, hence the use of the phrase "single mother" in this paper.

Because Westerhof's autobiography is produced as fiction, anyone commenting on her life and her autobiography is obliged to include some of her life experiences even if these are entirely omitted from her fictional autobiography. Thus this paper becomes a product of an interwoven representation of her fictional life as Rumbidzai in *Unlucky in Love* and as Tendayi Westerhof in real life. Where the need arises to draw a distinction between the two Westerhofs (Tendayi and her former husband, Clemens), reference will be made to Westerhof the writer and Clemens Westerhof, the husband, in full or by means of his first name only.

Autobiography: Defining the Self

Unlucky in Love is set in Harare with intermittent references to the protagonist Rumbidzai's childhood on the farming and mining areas of Nyahunda and Ndarama respectively. The story opens with the day Rumbi discovers that she is HIV positive. This revelation begins a journey based mainly on flashbacks as she travels through failed relationships with two partners, Joe and Emmanuel, childhood memories, the period after the diagnosis and how these negatively impact on an already turbulent marriage as well as her social life. Hers is a real-life story that resuscitates inner memories of her beleaguered life and begins a journey towards a healing which ultimately demonstrates a strength that has epitomised the woman she is today.

As the title "autobiography" indicates, it is the life story that is written from the viewpoint of the subject. Simply put it is the biography of oneself. This means the autobiography is usually written by the adult narrator and captures his/her life from childhood and thus is based on the reconstruction of memory. It is therefore different from biography, which is a life history written by anyone other than the person whose life is being narrated. One characteristic of the autobiography is its failure to keep to a strict chronology of events and this can be attributed to the fact that because it is a story constructed from memory, the storyteller recalls past events that are most significant to her present life and these are ordered on the basis of importance, interest, value, "recency" among other things (Gergen & Gergen 1993). In Westerhof's case, her story places emphasis on the "causal linkages" (Gergen & Gergen 1993) that could be attributed to her present HIV status.

By writing the autobiography Westerhof rebels against the accepted social norm of *kusafugura hapwa* (which can be translated as "not opening one's

armpits” which is synonymous to the English proverb avoiding “washing one’s dirty linen in public”). Her story transgresses the widely observed convention of being secretive about one’s HIV status. Through disclosure she explores what it means being first a woman in a patriarchal system, then an unmarried, then married and later divorced mother in the context of HIV. Her story is meant to have a redeeming effect on her as she attempts to extricate herself from patriarchal values that dictate that she has to be married to obtain a positive identity for herself. While she respects and appears to have internalised these conventions she also values the independence, power and leadership roles that the conventional Zimbabwean man refuses to allow a woman to have. In the end she chooses the latter, the result of which is the writing of the autobiography, denoting a liberated self.

The autobiography usually incorporates one’s childhood which according to Cockshut (1984: 3) is understandably “the most important time of all ... [where] parents and siblings are often central ...”. Rumbi reconstructs her childhood and appears to be nostalgic for a lost innocence. She narrates how she came to be the woman she has become and her failure to have a successful marriage of her own. She relates the features of her culture which have socialised her into what she is. While Cockshut appears to downplay the role of spouses in autobiographies, it is apparent that in Westerhof’s work, her ex-husband Horst, without whose presence the plot would not have taken its current shape, plays a significant role and is part of the symbolic events in her story. It is through the dramatic event of his testing positive that the story unfolds. Cockshut, however, points out that even when the role of the spouse is highlighted there is the tendency to idealise the part played by the self as revealed in the statement, “[T]hough the distinguished autobiographer may equally be celibate or happily married or sexually promiscuous, there is something inherently virginal about his [or her] aim” (p. 4). Since the autobiography is focused on the self, there is the tendency to positively incline the story to one’s favour. Thus there could be a grain of truth in Cockshut’s contention, but it can be argued that while Rumbi unravels the overtly promiscuous behaviour of her husband, she does not totally exonerate herself from blame. She laments over the “foolish decisions in love” that she has made regarding all the three men in her life, all of whom could have contributed to her HIV status.

The writing of a fictional autobiography has its own complexities, chief of which is the demarcation between fact and fiction. The reason why this is so can be attributed to the fact that “the autobiographer is retreating from life, temporarily, to find something in himself that the ordinary round of life, both domestic and professional, ignores or pushes aside” (Cockshut 1984: 4). Hetata, however, offers a different perspective when he points out that although a thin line demarcates autobiography and fiction, autobiography is best enjoyed when it incorporates elements of fiction. The following statement makes this claim:

Autobiography is at its best when it is written in a language, in a form which is close to fiction, when it moves freely in time, captures the imagination then lets it soar up on an independent flight. It should tell me how the author became who he is, his experiences, his choices in life, reveal the things we suppress, or fear, or hide, or show under false colours, the “truth” of the individual self, how it relates to the world, to society, to family, to a wife or a lover, to friends and rivals, to the system and values which govern our life.

(Hetata 2005: 3)

Dennett (1992: 96) echoes similar sentiments when he asks, “Aren’t all fictional selves dependent for their very creation on the existence of real selves?” If the answer is affirmative then there must be reasons why authors hide behind fictional autobiographies. In Westerhof’s case, writing the fictional autobiography may have been a strategy to evade the cultural taboos that could have constrained her freedom to express her innermost secrets. Even though the reader still registers the gaps inherent in the story that could be attributed to these cultural constraints, this, however, is covered by the fact that it being a fictional autobiography, the writer may choose to exclude incidents that may not be so important in the thrust of the story. The writer has the licence to choose to omit, alter or even falsify information to suit the movement of the story. The role of the reader then becomes that of critiquing the validity of the story and thus he or she is involved in the process of rewriting the story, insinuating possible reasons for such gaps. In *Unlucky in Love*, one can deduce a latent desire by Westerhof for a boy child as shown by the inclusion of two fictional boy children, Tawanda and Takura; in real life Westerhof has only girls. Questions, however, have been raised regarding the employment of fictional genres in an autobiography, whether it takes away from or contributes to the portrayal of truth, leading to the debate of fact versus fiction. Gergen and Gergen have also pointed out how one can be accurate or inaccurate in the conveyance of facts. To deal with some of these problems, Cockshut states that an autobiography can be read in two ways: as a work of art, or as a historical record. While this paper contests that every work is art and is in itself a record of history (in this case Westerhof’s in the light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic), it focuses more on Westerhof’s autobiography as a work of art. Here the licence is to freely “note interior inconsistencies of falsities of tone, but relegate external evidence of untruth or exaggeration to mere scholarly footnotes” (Cockshut 1984: 6). As a work of art, the goal is to incorporate an aspect of entertainment in the story and thus the autobiography according to Hetata should not “be left to sink in a morass of events, of facts, of places, of developments which we can always read about in other books, in history or biography, or social studies or travelogues or in anything else” (2005: 3). In other words, no reader would enjoy the dull chronicling of day-to-day activities of an ordinary person. Elevation of certain events over others is most likely to capture and maintain a sustained

reading of the given text. After all, the author and the narrator are one and the same person and even when there are additions and subtractions, the essence of the story still remains.

What remains is the underlining of the fact that the fictional autobiography has its own uses. The task of the reader is to identify inconsistencies within a given autobiography. The autobiography should not be too subjective to tilt everything in the author's favour, neither should it be too objective to completely obliterate and distance its personal nature (Cockshut 1984). It is often difficult to tell when one is departing from the truth or not. One is faced with the dilemma of when to draw the line, that is, separate fact from fiction. One, however, can confirm the accuracy of narratives by placing them within their historical epochs, which are attested to in this case by other AIDS narratives. The issue of accuracy is best addressed by Pascal (1960: 1) who says, "Even if what [autobiographers] tell us is not factually true, or only partly true, it always is evidence of their personality".

The autobiography as a literary form is therefore invaluable as it captures the history of a particular period and is insightful into how people responded to various crises. It is unfortunate that many Zimbabweans did not document their experiences in the initial stages of the prevalence of HIV and AIDS leaving the current fictional autobiography to provide a stronger literary genre than other literary forms in that "[it] ... is more imaginative than passively reportorial" (Spengemann 1980: 209).

Apart from its strength as a work of art, Westerhof's autobiography is therapeutic as she reconstructs the self after a period of introspection and re-evaluation. Eminent psychologists have prescribed writing down one's torments, grievances and sources of bitterness as a way of dealing and letting go of the pressures that weigh down and depress individuals. The writing of the autobiography thus has therapeutic benefits for the writer from the traumas of the past. While chronicling events afflicting their lives, the writers provide us with a small fraction of history that is invaluable. Thus whilst the authors are telling their story, the readers are embroiled in writing their own story when they identify loopholes within a given autobiography. The value of the autobiography should not be discredited as Pascal (1960: 162) puts it; that it "offers a better instrument of inquiry into the truth of personality and personal relations than does imaginative literature, in particular the novel."

Womanhood in Shona Culture

Perceptions on any given individual are largely shaped by the society from which an individual emerges. Women are defined in various ways in Zimbabwean culture. The woman in Zimbabwean society does not have a voice as most issues are underlined by the patriarchal voice of the same

society. Society itself also constitutes fellow women who conform and thereby bolster and perpetuate the patriarchal nature of that society. Woman in this instance refers to a woman of marriageable age as well as adolescents who mother their own children. A good woman in Zimbabwean society is one endowed with *unhu* (decorum), one in whom societal values have properly been inculcated; one who should be able to represent her people without them suffering any shame. Such values have tended to include those that stipulate that the woman should be submissive and that she has no choice in whom to marry but only the young or older men who happen to show interest in her. Her choice of men is limited only to those who approach her and propose love to her, hoping that one of them eventually marries her. The man gives her an identity at marriage, that is, “Mrs Somebody” and Westerhof underscores this in the following statement, “In my culture, I often think women are denied any real identity. When a Shona woman marries, she takes on her husband’s name ... but when she has a child, she immediately loses even her own first name and is instead referred to like my own mother ... as amai Farai [Farai’s mother]” (Westerhof 2005: 3).

Because a woman has limited alternatives when it comes to men they wish to marry, many women make wrong *choices*, or are misled into believing they are entering into genuine and lasting relationships with potential suitors. As the man takes the leading role in courtship, the decision to keep or terminate the relationship is entirely his in most cases. It is unfortunate that the same man usually “changes” his mind usually after having had his way with the jilted lover (the possibility of her being pregnant being high). The inopportune part is that a woman who bears children out of wedlock or somehow “fails” to keep a marriage intact does not find favour with society. Gaidzanwa (1985: 14) highlights this when she says, “Motherhood is respectable and held in high esteem as long as it goes with or is preceded by socially approved wifehood”.

It is this dilemma that many women face, particularly those desperate for marriage. No woman should propose to or openly profess her love for a man. It is because of these cultural values pertaining to womanhood and marriage, that the woman is placed in such a dilemma. Thus a woman’s ultimate goal is to get married and have children for her to be accepted in the society. Yet it is also the same society which commodifies women such that men freely take them as sexual objects to experiment with. Rumbi underlines this fact when she says, “[I]t was so embarrassing to see men my father’s age chasing after young girls ...” (Westerhof 2005: 38). Rumbi herself is not immune from the same men and her vulnerability to men’s predatory eyes begins at a very tender age though she somehow manages to evade these. However, this is not the case with a classmate, Kudzai, who is made pregnant and has to leave school. To add to the onslaught, the culprits decline the repercussions that go with their actions and are often seen

denying responsibility, a phenomenon that has been socially accepted to the point of normalcy. The victim becomes the culprit as the woman shoulders the labels that go with her condition. This, however, has been subject to debate, as men believe women use pregnancy to trap them into marriage. Rumbi suffers this predicament when the first two relationships with Joe and Emmanuel fail to solemnise into marriage. Even when she eventually gets married to Horst he believes she got pregnant to “trick” him (p. 79). The whole concept of unmarried mothers and the negative perceptions regarding their welfare thus become a societal construct. Should the young woman realise that the suitor of her choice has no interest in her, she is obliged to attach herself to anyone who happens to show any interest. This is particularly true of women who have, according to societal conventions, surpassed marriageable age, or, in Westerhof’s, case have had children before marriage.

On Being Single, with Children

The unmarried mother’s case in the eyes of society is critical. While children are valued in Shona society, those born out of wedlock are cause for shame, and the mother an epitome of loose morals. She therefore faces the full wrath of society and is subject to stereotyping. Being an unmarried mother is synonymous to being a prostitute – one who liberally sleeps around with many men. Yet prostitution to El Sadawi (1989: 55) “means sexual intercourse between a man and a woman aimed at satisfying the man’s sexual and the woman’s economic needs”. Unfortunately, this stigma also applies to those women whose sexual encounters (even the first) result in pregnancy and are discarded (including cases where there is no evidence of pregnancy). This is what happens when Rumbi decides to have sexual relations with Emmanuel and has her first child: she does not expect to have any material returns. She sincerely wanted to get married as demonstrated by the necessary steps she follows which are commensurate with the Shona cultural procedure one follows when intending to get married. She gets him to meet her people, even though the gesture is not reciprocated from his part.

Thus in Zimbabwe, the term “prostitute” does not only refer to women who sell sexual services, but is “used broadly to insult and censure any woman who is physically located beyond male control or who is behaving in ways that men disapprove of” (Hungwe 2006: 42). Hungwe displays the same contradictions evident in the patriarchal system where Zimbabwean men do not like “soiled goods’ (though they are more than happy to soil them)” (Westerhof (2005: 3)); a theme which is also in line with the lyrics in Dolly Parton’s famous song “Just Because I Am a Woman”. This only demonstrates how the sexual freedoms that are bestowed upon the man can never be matched or extended to a woman. Evidence shows this to be a

universal fact; Rumbi's first two men are Zimbabwean while the third is of German origin. El Sadawi (1989) also illustrates this phenomenon amongst Arab men who have the same sexual liberty unlike their female counterparts. Westerhof's desperation, it should be underlined, is not so much for the fulfilment of economic needs as the case with a prostitute but to be a "Mrs Somebody" (2005: 3) and being the traditional wife who is looked after by her husband.

When Rumbi has three children (from Emmanuel and Joe), society is quick to judge her unmarried-mother status, and she is never given the platform to defend or explain the circumstances behind it. In real life even the fact that the first two children belonged to one man is easily forgotten; she is accused of having four children with four different men (including Clemens). Such is the stigma that haunts most never-been-married mothers. Her story thus chronicles that internal guilt and internalised masculine belief that she has erred and there is the need to correct her mistakes and the image that goes with it all. When Horst arrives on the scene, Westerhof admits, "my chances of finding a suitable husband were very slim" (p. 3). Regrettably, in the subsequent attempts to correct her unmarried-mother status, Westerhof ironically aggravates the stigma that accompanies that condition.

To understand the gravity of the dilemma of an unmarried or single mother, it is important to also focus on a single unemployed mother to understand her plight, as the prevalence of such mothers in Zimbabwean society is rampant. Because they do not have the financial base with which to sustain themselves and their children, such mothers are even more vulnerable to be abused by men. Westerhof being one such mother at one time also reveals this in her statement, "[M]y life as a single mother was always an uphill struggle, not just in terms of financing my children's upbringing, but in being accepted by the society I was part of" (p. 3). Some of these financially unstable mothers turn to prostitution as a means of survival, a theme that Virginia Phiri (2002) explores in *Desperate*. Stella in Chidavaenzi's *Haunted Trail* (2006) becomes a shebeen queen and prostitute in order to sustain her son, Michael. In this way, single motherhood becomes a complicated task, and many women are forced into relationships retrogressive to their lives in a bid to scratch out a living.

In the autobiography, Westerhof captures her inner dilemmas, her fears and her aspirations. Initially, by living up to societal values and expectations, Westerhof is blinkered into the inability to examine her situation and act accordingly. Her involvement with Emmanuel should have been an eye-opener and she should never have gone on to have another child with Joe. She, however, makes the *right* decision to marry Horst although when reading between the lines, any reader can see the characteristics that are prevalent in the choice of men she makes. First, they are attracted to her by her external beauty, then the usual dangling of material things and lastly the promise of marriage. It is by sheer luck that Horst marries her, otherwise he

would have left without marrying her just like the other men before him. He also has his own negative history of failed marriages having been married twice before he meets her!

In Shona society the single woman also manifests herself through the married but divorced class, the one that Westerhof belongs to currently. This status does not help her either, as a divorced woman is still viewed negatively. It is the sole reason why some women would rather stay in abusive marriages or relationships for fear of the stigma that goes with this label. Gaidzanwa succinctly states that “[a] lack of alternatives for women without husbands partly accounts for the women’s reluctance to divorce even when the marriage is stressful ... divorce is a sign of failure ... that [the woman] cannot use her womanly wiles and virtues to get a man and keep him” (1985: 54). Westerhof is thus emerging from such a society whose values do not give much choice for the woman.

Unlucky in Love: Breaking New Ground

As a single mother, the kind of stigma Westerhof suffers is multifaceted: the stigma of single motherhood against her career as a model and public personality and that of HIV and AIDS. In spite of this she has broken new ground in a number of ways. Firstly, being a public figure, she has had the opportunity to publicise her status to the benefit of those also infected, as well as the uninfected. But disclosure has not been without its own challenges; responses to her going public have earned her from criticism, outright insults, to near catastrophe when her modelling business nearly grinds to a halt. Through Rumbi, Westerhof follows the correct steps of gradually disclosing her status first to her daughter, her mother and her friend Jean, before finally going public. Weiner, Hellmann and Battles (1998: 195) recommend this where the HIV-positive individual discloses his/her status in “[c]onditions under which it is most likely to occur, [that is] appropriate relationship level with receiver for revealing, appropriate situational context, appropriate comfort time with receiver, and favourable receiver characteristics such as trustworthiness ...”. Leary and Schreindorfer (1998: 112) also suggest that sufferers should immerse themselves in stigma avowal activities, as these are most likely “to obtain considerable amount of social acceptance by members of the community”. Westerhof does exactly that by trying to retrieve a sense of the self in a society still grappling with denial. In *Unlucky in Love*, Rumbi underlines this tradition of silence on HIV and AIDS when she says, “Ninety percent of the problem about this disease is that it happens only behind closed doors and whispers and no-one ever talks straight about it” (2005: 90).

Secondly, by writing *Unlucky in Love*, she breaks the silence and offers us that part of her private life that has not been publicised in the media. Although *Unlucky in Love* epitomises the remarkable strength of its writer,

it has been met with mixed feelings with Lilian Westerhof (Clemens Westerhof's new wife) dismissing it as a pack of lies, having "more holes than a gold mine" (newzimbabwe.com 2006). Westerhof has been called a gold-digger and after her ex-husband's money. Thus she places her situation, generally conveyed to the public in the media, within the context of her private life, and in so doing explains aspects that justify her actions in the limelight.

Thirdly, by publicly refusing to drop the name Westerhof she asserts herself as no easy weakling, and her audacity is clearly displayed in a letter to one national newspaper where she says, "[I]f [Clemens] has a problem with me using the name Tendayi Westerhof, he is free to change his name to something else as the name I use is merely by choice and my legal right" (newzimbabwe.com 2006). She also successfully claims maintenance (child support) for her children. It should be noted that even in Elizabethan England the unmarried mother was a cause for "anxiety and opprobrium", but according to Cregan (2001: 2) "evidence of the paternity of illegitimate children was actively sought in the quest to remove the upkeep of these children from the parish by returning ... financial responsibility to the father of the child". It is therefore surprising how Zimbabweans seem to condone and condemn women who seek this support for their children. By claiming maintenance, Rumbi makes the right decision for her children.

To add to this, *Unlucky in Love* is in itself a form of self-therapy where the writing provides "a prime means of escaping the thrall of the past and opening oneself out to the future The autobiography [becomes] a corrective intervention into the past, not merely a chronicle of elapsed events" (Giddens 2004: 249). Giddens also quotes Rainwater who says, "The basic purpose of writing autobiographical material is to help you be done with the past Holding a dialogue with time means identifying stressful events (actual events in the past and possible ones to be faced in the future) and coming to terms with their implications" (Rainwater in Giddens 2004: 250).

Furthermore, *Unlucky in Love* presents practical strategies for coping with the challenges women living with HIV and AIDS, particularly pregnant women, face. Hers thus become a collective endeavour and the fictional autobiography a representation of the collective voices of women in similar circumstances. In the foreword, the Public Personalities against Aids Trust (PPAAT – an organisation Westerhof founded) recognises the autobiography as a representation of "problems that many women face such as gender imbalances, love and both supportive and destructive relationships". The autobiography becomes an empowering tool that can be used "to disseminate not just HIV and AIDS information but to provid[e] encouragement and support to those who quietly fear knowing their status ..." (PPAAT). While *Unlucky in Love* is commended for its simplicity in language and style, the question that remains unanswered is whether it

reaches the majority of the ordinary women, particularly rural women, many of whom are illiterate.

Through her activism against both patriarchy and the new challenge of HIV, Westerhof takes charge of her life, displaying a determination and a course of action taken from experiences learnt more or less from her distant childhood values of autonomy. As a child she shows an outspokenness and autonomy that even her mother chides her for and warns that she “would never get a husband because [she] talked too much” (Westerhof 2005: 40). Her HIV status also means learning newer forms of survival but also obtaining them from the natural her as reflected in the nostalgic past of her childhood. As if to confirm her mother’s fears, her husband Horst is worried by her seeming unbridled behaviour. One of his complaints is “that a Zimbabwean woman who loved her husband did everything he said and never talked back, much less argue with him” (p. 31). Horst’s statement reflects the patriarchal tradition that only aims at domination and control which favours the ideal wife who “is totally committed to serving the interests of her husband and her children even at the risk of martyring or sacrificing her own interests ... women who are obedient to their husbands even if the husbands are wrong and unreasonable ... women who do not complain when they are badly treated” (Gaidzanwa 1985: 29). In other words, the woman should be an “all accepting creature of fecundity and self sacrifice” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 58).

In her disclosure, Westerhof demystifies the stigma that is often associated with the people with the virus and the disease. Her part-time occupation, modelling, does not seem to help matters either but exacerbates the negative perceptions that haunt and dog her life, which is the reason why she has been a victim of the label “prostitute”. This is hardly surprising in a society where the image of a woman is supposed to be celebrated not by physical appearance but by “hard work, sound morals and discipline” and the girls “[who] dress properly” (Teurai Ropa Nhongo (now Joyce Mujuru) quoted in Lyons 2004: 216). This is contrary to how models dress. Teurai Ropa Nhongo was renowned (in the 80s) for her avid criticism of beauty pageants. With a society whose background is like this, then Westerhof’s reputation in the face of many Zimbabweans is rather adverse. But by sticking to her profession and encouraging other girls to take up modelling, Westerhof shows a determination to fight against a social tide that is overwhelmingly powerful. Westerhof has also been inspirational to younger women and has also stressed the need for women to carve out careers for themselves. She realises that “being a good woman, washing and cooking wasn’t enough” (Westerhof 2005: 57). Modelling is one career which she takes up part-time, though looked down upon and disdained by society. Mahachi-Harper (2004) shows how the concept of beauty pageants is a growing phenomenon in spite of the negative perceptions, a factor that can be attributed to the tenacity of women like Westerhof in the face of criticism. Westerhof does not shy away from these pessimistic conceptions

and by taking up this profession, she insists on the value of womanhood and particularly celebrates the biological attributes of a woman. She emerges a confident, victorious and liberated individual. She also goes a step further – introducing beauty pageants even for people with HIV, underlining the need for them to lead as normal lifestyles as possible for them to overcome the stigma as well as the psychological effects that go with the virus and the disease. To use Meena’s words (quoted by Abrahams, Galloy, Ntaringwi, Mufema & McFadden 1999: 5), Westerhof demonstrates how “[a]culture of oppression can be converted into one of liberation only when the oppressed take some action to create an alternative for themselves”.

The act of writing from a woman of Westerhof’s standing in society requires great courage as well as determination. It is this determination that does not make her cower back even when she is the target of intense hatred from both men and women in real life. While the other men in her life should likewise take the brunt, it is Clemens Westerhof who sealed Tendayi’s fate. Many Zimbabweans, ironically, pity the former coach of the Zimbabwean national soccer team, women included, who still revere his successes as coach. This, however, has blinkered many from making rational judgments about his private life. It is through him that Tendayi has earned painful labels like “gold-digger”, “slut” and many more in the media. Westerhof’s strength, however, lies in not wallowing in self-pity but in empowering herself as well as other women in similar situations. Her linking the authorship of her book with activism portrays her as a living, practical example of people living with HIV and activism, a phenomenon that is rare in Zimbabwe. Westerhof is also better placed to utilise her status as a celebrity to act as role model for old and young alike. Her celebrity status helps counter sceptics’ beliefs and perceptions about people living with the virus and the pandemic; she is a living example of a person with HIV. Her appearance in the media could help people grapple with the reality of HIV/AIDS.

To bolster this activism, Tendayi Westerhof founded the Public Personalities against Aids Trust (PPAAT) which has joined other international organisations in lobbying for funds for AIDS sufferers. Her pragmatism demonstrates that in spite of their HIV status, people can lead healthy and positive lifestyles. She also places emphasis on another phenomenon that most Zimbabweans would choose to ignore: public figures who are extremely influential and could change the way society treats people living with HIV and AIDS. Their role in the media and their occupation of public spaces mean they are in a position to authenticate the existence of the pandemic and that it is not a disease for the poor alone.

Her being mother to four children by three different men is subject to publicity, derision and scorn even from fellow women. She, however, defies the general misconception that women who are literally left holding the baby are loose and therefore deserve public ridicule. She challenges

mainstream cultural perceptions and raises herself up from what are presumed ashes of shame that epitomise women of her stature. She does not openly blame her husband Horst for her status, which seems to suggest that she takes herself as an equal active participant in the contraction of the disease because of her “foolish choices” (promiscuous men).

Through her call for sisterhood of all women to fight the oppressive and insensitive patriarchal system, her insistence to display autonomy starts with her empowering the self: getting a job, ridding herself of a discordant relationship with her husband, and then claiming maintenance for her children from the responsible fathers. She starts with Joe, then in real life Clemens, both of whom do not conform to this role readily. Here the metaphor of the hunter and the hunted are reversed. Rumbidzai emerges from the hunted helpless doe to assert her presence by making the father of her children realise they have responsibilities. She refuses to be intimidated by merciless reports in the press and power of her former husband, but goes out to set the record straight. Her practicality is furthered by the measures she follows upon realising that she is pregnant, the prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV (PMTCT). She demonstrates overall how from a background of poverty and oblivion a woman can rise to heights that are never imaginable for the ordinary rural girl today.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Tendayi Westerhof's story seeks to correct the false image of the single mother that is rampant in Zimbabwean society; that she happens to be the unfortunate one not to be married. *Unlucky in Love* aptly captures the predicament of the single mother, her challenges as well as her aspirations. It captures the misfortunes of a young woman whose intentions were pure, that is, getting a man who could marry her and provide her with the socially accepted happily-ever-after marriage. She indeed was unlucky considering the fact that most married women indulged in sexual relationships before marriage and through sheer luck met men who consented to marriage. At the same time not all married women are living with the right kind of man. Some are putting up with physical, emotional and even sexual abuse in the name of marriage. *Unlucky in Love* consequently displays the pure strength of a woman surrounded by adverse attitudes, who fights through these to emerge a leader, organiser and activist, all of which have been stifled by the society she grew up in.

Tendayi Westerhof's writing embodies the commendable goal of spreading awareness about HIV, the issue of disclosure, living with the virus and best of all the success story of prevention of mother-(parent)-to-child transmission of the virus, in spite of her coming from a background of subversive identity. Through her actions and decisions portrayed in the fictional autobiography, she demonstrates how to survive abusive relation-

ships and acts as an agent of change in a fast-transforming society particularly in the HIV and AIDS environment. Her story demystifies the stereotypes that surround the single and unmarried mother and demonstrates her human face; that the woman in general is more than just a “biological [creature]” and that “it is not all she is and it should not be used to limit her” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 57). The fact that renowned writer and film director Tsitsi Dangarembga has shot a documentary on the life of Westerhof is sure evidence of the value of the work that Westerhof is espousing. Her (Westerhof’s) hard work and resilience should not go unrecognised but should be given more publicity so as to benefit more people, women in particular.

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